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The COVID-19 pandemic and methodological constraints: Autoethnographic and prefigurative responses

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pst**Clare Williams** 

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Abstract

While sets of constraints have become normalised in research production, the COVID-19 pandemic mandated shifts in research ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. The society-wide, real-time experiment of the pandemic lockdowns constructed a set of prefigurative counterfactual contexts in which alternative structures and processes came to be, albeit briefly, normalised. Two examples illustrate the risks and opportunities that emerged. Firstly, the turn to autoethnography and creative methods offers a methodological challenge to the minoritisation of certain voices within the academy. Secondly, and more substantively, pivots in response to lockdowns offered glimpses of labour market inclusion best practice through the prefiguration of alternative workplace norms, suggesting the potential value of prefigurative counterfactuals as research method. Nevertheless, both methodological and substantive insights explored here in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic were mediated by technology which has the potential to reproduce embedded dominant epistemologies and ontologies.

Keywords

Autoethnography, constraints, disability, methodology, technology

Introduction

Research constraints exist, even at the best of times. Pre-existing rules, disciplinary best practice, guiding principles or norms delimit acceptable fields, methods and theoretical modes of enquiry. We might think of constraints empirically, analytically and normatively in terms of the *what*, *how* and *why* of research. Thus, any researcher is at once empirically constrained by the data she can gather and materials she can access. Similarly, she is likely constrained by the requirements of her programme or institution, her funding or visa stipulations, the expectations of her supervisor or team and other demands on her time such as teaching, caring or her own physical limitations. Analytically, she may be ontologically and epistemologically

bounded not only by hegemonies within her own field of practice, but by dominant regimes of practice and rationalities within society that present accepted ways of apprehending problems. Normatively, such ontological and epistemological boundedness may foreclose the opportunity to imagine the world as it might be, or to effect the change that she wishes to see. Finally, methodological constraints that have emerged as preferred ways of conducting research specific to each discipline will guide her choice of methods. They may also direct her interrogation of existing ontologies and

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epistemologies within her field, framing research questions and orienting potential outcomes.

Normalised constraints are perhaps most acutely observable for postgraduate researchers. The typical doctoral programme, for example, is structured around constraints that focus the framing and conduct of the research. Thus, the *what* (a contribution to knowledge in an established discipline), and *where* (related to existing literature to spatially or geographically grounded research through empirical data or a case study) of the project set pre-determined criteria. Similarly, the *who* (relating to real people or the real world), *when* (historical, or dealing with the present or future), *why* (with motivation and passion for the subject) and *how* (following clearly determined, accepted and normalised methods and methodologies within the field) are also likely to be pre-mapped to varying degrees by disciplinary or sub-disciplinary expectations. We can note from the outset, then, that pre-existing sets of rules, norms and preferences delimit choices available to doctoral researchers that not only guide their research trajectory but socialise them into the academy through training and practice. While similar constraints apply to early career researchers wishing to establish themselves, we might note that opportunities to deviate increase as a researcher becomes more established, or tend to entail less risk. At the same time, the internalisation of disciplinary standards may mean that their challenge demands heightened intentionality.

Nevertheless, for postgraduate and early career researchers, such constraints comprise the backdrop to any research project; a landscape into which they have been encultured. To abide by these norms is to conform to best practice and to demonstrate understanding of what it means to conduct original, significant and rigorous research within the academy that can be readily categorised and assessed by one's peers. Similarly, adherence can facilitate publication and realise valorisation by one's institution in terms of research outputs that can be submitted

to the Research Excellence Framework, for example. To stay within these constraints is to remain, for the most part, safe while, conversely, to challenge or step beyond implies the taking of risk. Yet, as this article illustrates through two autoethnographic case studies, it is the taking of risk that might offer us creative ways of reimagining how we might respond to the myriad crises facing society. Nevertheless, the need for early career researchers to demonstrate fluency in established hegemonic research techniques and practices of their field should not be underestimated, despite the potential of such practices to reproduce the core ontologies and epistemologies that researchers might seek to problematise (Damhof & Gulmans, 2023; Freeman, 2023).

Enter, at this point, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated legal, economic and social disruptions and uncertainties (Meckin et al., 2023; Nind et al., 2023). Rapid pivots appeared as some routes for enquiry were foreclosed by disease management restrictions (Kara & Khoo, 2020b; Meckin et al., 2023). The most notable among regulatory responses to the pandemic in the UK were the lockdowns beginning in March 2020 (Baker et al., 2021). For researchers, these not only precluded face to face data gathering, or research techniques requiring co-presence or physical proximity, but they also disrupted vital processes of socialisation into the academy (Department for Education, 2022; Meckin et al., 2023). While resulting limitations enabled insights as to the potential reconstruction of research hegemonies, they also hinted at methodological possibilities as Section 'Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals' explores (Kara & Khoo, 2020c; S. Ryan et al., 2023). Many of the pivots arising from pandemic constraints turned to technology to moderate the reduced opportunities for interaction (see, inter alia Boellstorff et al., 2013; Bonilla, 2020; Kara & Khoo, 2020a, 2020c; see generally Nind et al., 2023). While frustrating for many, such pivots have proved generative in their ability to

construct prefigurative research environments where counterfactuals could not only be imagined, but modelled, explored and challenged (Perry-Kessaris, 2021). We can understand prefiguration as a research technique that moves beyond speculative, ‘what if’ research questions to prefigurative ‘as if’ questions (Cooper, 2017, 2020; Cooper & Renz, 2023; Perry-Kessaris, 2021). Accordingly, research respondents are invited not simply to imagine an alternative set of social relations and norms, but to respond to their novel existence. In suggesting alternative ways of doing, talking and thinking, counterfactuals may extend a prefigurative methodology to indicate the construction or emergence of radically new regimes of doing and rationalities of thinking.

Such regimes and rationalities, or our taken-for-granted ways of doing, talking and thinking about economic, legal and social phenomena are frequently so deeply embedded in everyday ontologies of being as to be largely invisible and tacit in their operation (Williams, 2022a). They tend to pass unobserved and unchallenged, and yet continuously exert immeasurable influence over not only what we are able to understand about the world, but how we are able to respond. Such tacit assumptions have the effect of concealing crucial points of critical ontological, epistemological and methodological challenge, and the necessity of approaching these afresh through novel constraints can, therefore, suggest radical alternatives both for research framing and analysis.

The potential to reimagine possible futures offers a space for inquiry that had previously lingered at the margins of traditional research methodologies in the social sciences. Referring to the future as ‘the undefined later than now’ (Miller, 2018, cited in Damhof & Gulmans, 2023, p. 52), we can appreciate that future imaginaries are, necessarily, fictions (Damhof & Gulmans, 2023, p. 52). Nevertheless, such fictions can suggest creative spaces for querying how things might be, prompting reframing not only of methodologies, but of research questions that challenge ontologies of the present.

To illustrate, two examples are explored in this paper incorporating both methodological and substantive prefigurative counterfactuals. The first, a normalisation of autoethnography as research method during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggests an opening up of reflective spaces where personal narratives, especially those of minoritised scholars, can be heard, challenging dominant paradigms. The second, building on prefigurative counterfactuals as method during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggests alternative approaches to workplace inclusion for disabled people through accessibility best practice that can be modelled, tested and refined in real world settings.¹ An awareness of how imaginative shifts in methodology might ‘unfreeze the narrative’ through reframing not only the future, but also the past and the present, offers a means to challenge what Mulgan refers to as the shrinking ‘possibility space’ of research, or the normalised models and methods that are unequal to the magnitude of challenges facing humanity (Grossman, 2017, cited in Damhof & Gulmans, 2023, p. 53; Lakoff, 2014; Mulgan, 2023, pp. 164–165).

Accordingly, ‘[a]ny society needs options, a menu of possibilities from which to draw, particularly when facing mounting crises, and every society needs some sense of the road ahead, a map of the future that doesn’t just take us to ecological ruin or to being enslaved by robots’ (Mulgan, 2023, pp. 163–164). Thus, we might argue that characteristics of the present research landscape including preferences for hard data and empirically grounded research, the ever-present impact agenda, rigour and a reliance on peer review all contribute to disciplinary expectations that tend to minimise, if not foreclose, the radical, the subversive and the imaginative (Mulgan, 2023, p. 165). The ability to not only imagine but prefigure counterfactuals and the ‘diverse and creative methodologies’ and techniques of enquiry needed for ‘the study of the possible’ has arguably never been more necessary (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 5). Yet, if the sum of crises, crashes and catastrophes facing society reflects not only a

‘poverty of imagination, but also [... a] poverty of hope’, how might we build on prefigured counterfactuals stemming from pandemic constraints that suggest new avenues of critical enquiry without fragmenting existing disciplines (Crilly, 2023, p. 48; Damhof & Gulmans, 2023, p. 51)? And what might counterfactual or imagined possibilities offer to our perceptions not only of future societies, but to our understandings of the present?

Taking constraints as a key catalyst for the prefiguration of counterfactuals, this paper explores the possibilities for constraints *as* methodology. Section ‘Internal and external constraints: Limitations and possibilities’ explores the meaning of constraints and differentiates these into three levels, pertaining to researchers, scholarly disciplines and wider society. In contextualising economic, legal and social responses to the pandemic as archetypal external constraints, the discussion explores how internal and external constraints can be mutually re-co-constitutive. Section ‘The role of technology in moderating constraints’ turns to the role of technology which, despite having intrinsic limitations, emerged as an enabling factor, suggesting sites at which and processes through which novel critiques of equality and fairness could emerge. Sections ‘Example 1: Methodological insights and innovations: Autoethnography’ and ‘Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals’ then turn to two examples of constraint-inspired prefigurative counterfactuals that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The first details methodological counterfactuals, querying what might be realised through the greater normalisation of autoethnography within the social science academy and its potential for foregrounding typically minoritised voices whilst simultaneously offering routes for cathartic scholarship. The second example in section ‘Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals’ explores empirical research carried out by the author that emerged from work-based constraints

challenging ontologies of disability in the context of labour market bounding and regulation. As a result of both illustrations, the methodological and substantive potential of prefigurative counterfactuals begins to emerge, suggesting a meaningful role for constraints *as* methodology. Section ‘Conclusions: Constraints as methodology?’ concludes by considering the possibilities of imagining the potential for a more intentional use of constraints in post-COVID-19 pandemic research.

Internal and external constraints: Limitations and possibilities

The alignment of ‘constraint’ with ‘limitation’, and the implication that this impoverishes potential, and delineates or forecloses possibility, invites challenge. Similarly, though, counterposing ‘constraint’ with ‘possibility’ might initially seem dichotomous. We can understand ‘constraints [as] play[ing] a key role [in] scaffolding the space of possibilities in which improvisation and chance give rise to novelty’ (Feiten et al., 2023, p. 1). This sits in contrast to the assumption that constraints temper or foreclose contexts of maximal freedom and creativity. The emergence of methodological creativity as a key skill for those undertaking research during the pandemic both engendered risk but also additional considerations around research authenticity and sustainability, and researcher and participant wellbeing (Clarke & Watson, 2020; Gratton et al., 2020). Creative methodologies not only allow for complex ideas and problems to be explored, but for an exploration of concepts that might defy verbal expression (Beresin & Bishop, 2023; Furman et al., 2019).

We might understand creativity as serendipitous insights that occur within the mind of the creator. Feiten et al. (2023) note the relational origins of creativity, seeing it as ‘emerging from the complex dynamics of systems comprising the interactions between heterogeneous material structures and processes as well as [...] human and non-human agents’ (p. 2). The suggestion that creativity arises interrelationally

offers a constructivist approach that suggests multiple feedback loops between the researcher and her environment (Feiten et al., 2023, p. 3). Creative responses to constraints, then, should not be seen as some personal or individual triumph against the odds, ‘but the result of complex processes of interaction between different numbers of agents and varying sets of material, cultural, and social constraints’ (Feiten et al., 2023, p. 11).

We can imagine three levels or rankings of research constraints; pertaining to the researcher, to their discipline and to society more broadly. Moreover, these might be internal or external. Internal researcher constraints might include feelings of self-doubt or imposter syndrome, while external researcher constraints speak to resource limitations of both time and money, as well as the limits of disciplinary knowledge and any requirements of the institution or programme. Internal disciplinary constraints might include preferred methodologies and accepted practices, dominant ontologies, taxonomies and ways of comprehending the world, as well an awareness (or lack thereof) of the capability of the discipline to respond to the research question at hand. External disciplinary constraints might include limited pathways to interdisciplinarity and attitudinal barriers of other disciplines. Finally, wider social constraints might include a relational appreciation of the depth and breadth of available networks, time and funding available, social expectations of the researcher (such as whether she should be raising children rather than studying), and the value that society places on her research. Additionally, we might think of barriers to travel, to engaging with the discipline in the first place, and regulatory, ethical, moral or other barriers to the conduct of certain research projects and so on (Abedi Dunia et al., 2023).

In shifting available opportunity sets, or expanding the ‘possibility space’ to the researcher, we should be mindful of the impact on the internal constraints and reflections on positionality and epistemologies (Mulgan, 2023, pp. 168–169). Thus, as the proposition of

constraint-based feedback loops above suggested, we can think of internal and external constraints as not only inter-related, but as mutually re-co-constitutive. External constraints such as travel bans necessitating pivots to online, telephone- or app-based research might increase feelings of imposter syndrome for the doctoral or early career researcher, leading to a scaling down of methodological ambition in a bid to stay within the ‘safe’ zone of the research map (Chakraverty, 2020; Gratton et al., 2020; Howlett, 2022; Muradoglu et al., 2022). Nevertheless, external constraints also brought existing inequalities into sharper focus in ways that demanded challenge to dominant social ontologies and, as section ‘Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals’ picks up in relation to substantive prefigurative insights, offered novel points of challenge. While some inequalities were highlighted, others were masked. For example, the pivot to online, telephone or app-based research offered more equitably accessible methods for those with physical disabilities whilst disadvantaging those with caring responsibilities or those excluded by digitisation trends (Abedi Dunia et al., 2023; Beaunoyer et al., 2020; Renz & Williams, 2022; S. Ryan et al., 2023).

Substantively, in constructing prefigurative counterfactual scenarios where, for example, working from home was briefly normalised, we were invited to consider what new ontologies might emerge were these situations to become normalised. Thus, as sections ‘Example 1: Methodological insights and innovations: Autoethnography’ and ‘Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals’ explore below, by shifting our intrinsic constraints through the imposition of extrinsic constraints, we glimpsed how existing ontologies and epistemologies might be challenged, prompting different worldviews to emerge, as well as the possibility for reflection on our own positionality, research framing and eventual outcomes. An ‘almost wholesale move to online research methods

during lockdown periods' enabled much research to continue without needing to 'radically chang[e] research designs' (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2020; Nind et al., 2023; S. Ryan et al., 2023, p. 537). Nevertheless, particular methods saw an increase in popularity and an evolution throughout the pandemic; namely those that enabled deep reflection such as auto-ethnography, and those that made research visible and tangible such as design-based methods (Campbell, 2016; Gratton et al., 2020; Kara & Khoo, 2020c; Nind et al., 2023, p. 623; Perry-Kessar, 2021). Before turning to two examples of methodological and substantive pivots in my own research that illustrate these trends, the following section considers the role of technology in moderating constraints and mediating associated risks.

The role of technology in moderating constraints

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first global pandemic in an age of instant communication. For those with access to the internet, television or radio, lockdowns or quarantines did not mean the curtailing of all communication. While this was enabling in many regards, potentially facilitating effective quarantining by (somewhat) mediating the resulting social isolation, technology such as social media and broadcast news heightened anxiety about the virus (Montazeri et al., 2023). Lockdowns might have exacerbated the digital divide, worsening inequalities and health outcomes based on lack of access to technology, but for those with access to the internet and the devices necessary to connect, most daily tasks could be continued during the lockdowns with some modification (Abedi Dunia et al., 2023; Barroga & Matanguihan, 2020; Holmes & Burgess, n.d.; Kara & Khoo, 2020b; S. Ryan et al., 2023; Van Dijk, 2017). This 'technologification' of modern life, accelerated by the pandemic, both ameliorated constraint-based regulatory responses, but also introduced sites

at which new constraints emerge, and digital exclusion in the context of methodological responses to COVID-19 has been extensively explored (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2020; Howlett, 2022; Kara & Khoo, 2020b). While the inequalities highlighted by digital exclusion are rightly deserving of attention, there is a wider methodological point to be made about the use of such connective technologies and their potential to reproduce dominant political and ideological epistemologies and ontologies (Braun et al., 2020, p. 685).

While our current ways of knowing, and their preferences for reductionism, objectivism, positivism and determinism demand challenge, these are the very epistemologies embedded in the connectivist technologies that mediated the pandemic lockdowns, enabling ongoing communication and speculative inquiry (Williams, 2022b). Technologies such as remote conferencing, algorithmic decision making and the recent emergence of artificial generative intelligence offer powerful tools for accessibility and the inclusion of people with physical disabilities in a range of contexts by sidestepping physical barriers to engagement in the built environment (Holloway et al., n.d.). Yet, in addition to raising further questions about minoritisation and digital exclusion, such technologies also have the potential to reproduce hegemonic ontologies and epistemologies or 'epistemic injustice[s]' (Fricker, 2007; Kenny et al., 2023). Challenging dominant epistemologies and ontologies that may be embedded in the deep algorithms underpinning emerging technologies requires that we propose new tools. Echoing Lorde's observation that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', Montuori similarly notes that '[t]he new world cannot be created with the creativity of modernity, which began to emerge in the Renaissance, and blossomed fully with industry and the great technological advances of the 19th and 20th century' (Lorde, 2018; Montuori, 2023, p. 158). Embedded in these modern technological advances, Montuori continues, are the epistemologies characteristic of

the age; ways of knowing the world that have led us to what Escobar (2023) refers to as ‘the polycrisis’ (p. 58).

Dominant approaches in disciplines such as economics and law – those scientific methodologies that seek to reduce, objectify and engage in positivist analyses – are those that have contributed to methodological or epistemic monocultures entrenched in social, political, economic and legal discourses (Bennett, 2015; Colander, 2010; Colander et al., 2009; de Sousa Santos, 2016). To step beyond these well-trodden boundaries is to experience the discomfort of disorientation, unpredictability and uncertainty, especially for the postgraduate or early career researcher (Barker et al., 2023; Meckin et al., 2023; Nind et al., 2023). In response, we can note recent scholarly shifts to ‘postnormal’ or ‘posthuman’ ontologies: ways of decentring the specifically human experience that offer us ways of moving beyond the embedded tropes and frames of modernity (Montuori, 2023; Norman, 2022). Similarly, we can note methodological shifts to decolonising, participatory, emancipatory, inclusive and transformative research that challenge entrenched reproductions of power and privilege, that queries who the knowledge production is for and how, as well as by whom and why (see, *inter alia*, Abedi Dunia et al., 2023; Adébísi, 2023; Barnes, 2003; Berghs, 2017; Jivraj, 2020; Mertens, 2007; Nind, 2017; Pickerill et al., 2021; Smith, 2012).

It is in this context that the rise of technologies such as artificial generative intelligence and algorithmic decision making now being embedded in many connectivist applications including social media offer powerful tools for accessibility and inclusion but also risk remaking the world in its current image. The design and development of such technologies according to dominant ontologies risk preserving in ‘digital aspic’ relations of power and ways of apprehending the world that privilege and minoritise in ways highlighted by the pandemic (Williams, 2022b, pp. 111–112). The final section returns to these questions to consider constraints *as* methodology. But these questions

become more pressing when we consider that many of the key responses to the pandemic that demanded alternative methodological approaches were those reliant on technology to facilitate data collection or build on insights from technologically-mediated social interactions. One response, explored in Section ‘Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals’, is to shift to prefiguration. Before that, section ‘Example 1: Methodological insights and innovations: Autoethnography’ explores a turn to autoethnography.

Example 1: Methodological insights and innovations: Autoethnography

As the UK entered its first lockdown in March 2020, daily opportunities for interaction were foreclosed. By contrast, as someone with a physical disability for whom the built environment and social attitudes had already foreclosed many of those daily opportunities, I found the shift to online engagement enabling. Job interviews, working life, international conference attendance and general participation in society became not only easier, but placed me on a level playing field with my non-disabled peers through the masking of my disability and the removal of the need to interact with an exclusionary built environment (Williams, 2022c). While I had identified benefits to the online pivot, the wider traumas and violence being perpetrated on disabled communities meant that it was problematic to share silver linings, and it was consequently many months before I began engaging with others about the enabling aspects of the lockdowns (Shakespeare et al., 2022). Finally broaching the subject with a colleague, I found confirmation of shared experiences, giving me the confidence to explore options for sharing my own through an autoethnographic account. Firstly, autoethnography offered a space for the dissemination of my own, usually minorised, voice and experiences within the academy. Secondly, in line with the deeply personal and reflective nature of autoethnographic

writing, it required careful consideration of my own positionality and how this interfaces with the surrounding built, social and cultural environments through which my disablement is usually constructed. Nevertheless, I was aware that autoethnographic publications are not usually regarded as demonstrating the same academic rigour as empirical or theoretical contributions, especially in socio-legal and socio-economic disciplinary fields (Adams et al., 2014, pp. 7–8). Yet opportunities to share my insights, along with the need for the retention of inclusion best practice glimpsed through pivots to online or hybrid events persuaded me that, even if my career trajectory were to suffer, it was a risk worth taking.

Campbell (2016) notes that '[a]utoethnography is a research method and methodology which uses the researcher's personal experience as data to describe, analyse and understand cultural experience' (p. 96). As a 'living body of thought', critical autoethnography engages in a process of becoming that allows us to question, reflect and act on our experiences 'with a specific focus on epiphanies that are deemed to have a particular influence on the course of life' (Winkler, 2018, p. 237, cited in Torres, 2021, p. 896). It requires a commitment to 'linking analysis and action as they unfold together in a material and ethical practice – by creating bridges between analytic, practical, and aesthetic modes of inquiry and representation' (Jones, 2016, p. 232, cited in Torres, 2021, p. 896). Being necessarily personal, autoethnography as method emerged specifically to challenge increasingly entrenched social scientific biases against the subjective in preference for an 'appreciation for personal narrative, story, the literary and the aesthetic, emotions, and the body' (Adams et al., 2014, p. 8). It also sought to respond to 'a heightened concern about the ethics and politics of research practices and representations and the increasing importance of social identities and identity politics' (Adams et al., 2014, p. 8).

There are two points to note. Firstly, autoethnography readily lends itself to chronicling

the experiences of typically minoritised voices within the academy, especially disabled researchers (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Kwon, 2024; Lourens, 2021). The size of minoritised groups means that large, quantified studies or data collection on any scale is unfeasible, entrenching group invisibility. An autoethnographic account can therefore convey the experiences of the individual, highlighting singular narratives that nevertheless can reveal relevant insights for the majority while drawing attention to sites of exclusion and oppression by offering voice 'to otherwise invisible minorities, to injustices, and to the plights of the suffering' (Gergen, 2023, p. 83). By revealing nuances that might be concealed within larger data sets, autoethnographic accounts can identify points at which dominant ontologies and epistemologies can be generative of wider inequalities and injustices. Secondly, autoethnography offers a more accessible and inclusive research method, not requiring expensive and environmentally problematic travel for fieldwork, or costly equipment to undertake. Further, it does not require long periods of time spent away from caring responsibilities to collect the data, nor does it rely on the physical capability for travel and interaction. By contrast, methods that tend to be seen as more prestigious tend to be more exclusive in terms of time and resources, leading to a dual function of gatekeeping into academia through the alignment of a perceived hierarchy of methods with privilege. Thus, despite autoethnography's perceived lack of rigour and its reduced scholarly value as a research method, Nind et al. (2023) observe that '[t]here is [...] repeated evidence about using new variants of (collaborative) autoethnography to develop understanding of the impact of crises on people's everyday lives and support them with meaning making and coping' (p. 623). The turn to autoethnographic approaches during the pandemic, aligning with my own experiences, exemplifies this, suggesting a greater need for reflective methods that can challenge intrinsic or self-imposed constraints deriving from extrinsic constraints of the pandemic (Harris & Holman Jones, 2021; A.

Markham & Harris, 2021; A. N. Markham et al., 2021; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2021; Sarkar, 2021; Surmiak et al., 2022; Torres, 2021; Zheng, 2021).

Gergen (2023) notes that as ‘the speed and complexity of social change increases’, the utility of traditional methods of enquiry recede into irrelevance, suggesting a need for a plurality of methodological approaches that can directly and meaningfully respond to emerging needs (p. 82). The COVID-19 pandemic has ‘disproportionately’ exacerbated the uncertainties facing early career researchers in particular, dissuading risk taking on the one hand, but prompting renewed commitments to collaborative engagement and a desire to harness the disruptions ‘as a turning point for the collective research imaginary’ (Barker et al., 2023, p. 593; Kara & Khoo, 2023 cited in Barker et al., p. 593; Levine et al., 2021). The result is not only an ongoing minoritisation of particular voices within the academy such as those with physical disabilities, but a minoritisation of the research methods that make these voices more visible. Preferences for personal and reflective accounts, necessitated by external, pandemic-related constraints, suggest that the imposition of external constraints may have prompted a reconsideration of the internal constraints that dissuade early career researchers from engaging with autoethnographic writing. From my own experience, while I have published theoretical and empirical work, my autoethnographic accounts have, so far, received the most attention and demonstrate the greatest potential for reshaping dominant narratives.

Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals

Combined external and internal constraints arising from pandemic lockdowns not only triggered methodological shifts in the turn to personal and reflective research, but gave rise to

substantive insights that, in turn, have prompted additional methodological innovations. Specifically, by allowing us to glimpse how society might be structured, and might function, differently through the rapid pivot to online, more inclusive, engagement, the prospect of using prefiguration to construct counterfactuals offered an alternative approach to reimagining processes of disablement through labour market bounding mechanisms (Russell, 2001; Russell & Malhotra, 2002). Nevertheless, remote working revealed some uncomfortable truths about workplace inclusion or sites of labour market bounding and the valorisation of labour, both in terms of how remote or flexible work is carried on in the UK but also in terms of how we study these processes (Work and Pensions Committee, 2021, paras 128–142). As such, labour market bounding processes, or the economic, legal and social ways in which particular groups are included or excluded from the labour market came under scrutiny as working from home was briefly normalised. Frustratingly, the overnight revelation for those who had long been campaigning for but denied hybrid access was that this counterfactual was entirely possible. It was a lack of will, rather than possibility, that had denied inclusion previously.

While reflecting on my experiences of the pandemic lockdowns, discussions with academic colleagues and activists revealed the need for research into how inclusion best-practice, glimpsed throughout the pandemic, could be retained as we moved ‘back to normal’ (F. Ryan, 2021). Accordingly, the ‘Imagining Inclusive Workspaces’ research project was born, and in 2022, a colleague and I carried out 41 semi-structured interviews online or by email with workers who identified as disabled, with a focus on physical impairment. The initial demand to participate in the research surprised us, underlining a clear need within disabled communities for the benefits experienced during the lockdowns and the resulting inclusion that many experienced to be recorded and heard. No remuneration was offered for participating, and

in advance of the interview, respondents were sent information about the research, a consent form, data protection details and ethical approval. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed, with engagement and ongoing dialogue through an online interactive workshop and draft report (Renz & Williams, 2022). The research led to both substantive and methodological insights, which are discussed in turn.

Substantively, the data confirmed a wider consensus that constraints arising from pandemic lockdowns, and the pivot to online or hybrid engagement, had produced enabling and inclusive effects for those with physical or energy impairments by rendering workspaces more accessible (Hale et al., 2020; Renz & Williams, 2022). Demands to rethink workplace norms had resulted in creative experimentation, with businesses adopting a range of technologically enabled settings that many participants lamented had not been seriously considered previously. The impacts of enhanced inclusion and accessibility not only enabled increased workplace productivity for participants, but also significant affective gains that were borne out in participants' repeated emphasis of increases in their self-worth as a result of the normalisation of remote and hybrid working as well as ability to better manage their conditions. However, this is in a wider context of ongoing labour market discrimination faced by disabled people, including evidence charting difficulties in accessing rights to workplace reasonable adjustments (M. Jones et al., 2021; M. K. Jones, 2008; TUC, 2021). Many participants noted that they had requested remote or hybrid working as a reasonable adjustment prior to the pandemic but had been denied, usually on business grounds, with employer concerns about productivity voiced throughout the pandemic. As one respondent noted, 'It's bittersweet; all the time they told us it wasn't possible was a lie because as soon as the pandemic hit, it became possible' (Renz & Williams, 2022, p. 5).

Nevertheless, while the benefits of remote or flexible working for disabled people have long been recognised, disabled people are less likely to be working in occupations with high home-working potential (Hoque & Bacon, 2022; M. Jones, 2022, p. 114637; Schur et al., 2020).

Methodologically, insights related to the role of online or remote interviewing, as well as the potential of prefigurative counterfactuals to (re-) imagine the world. While the research both investigated, and relied on, the use of technology as an inclusion and accessibility tool, there is a complex digital divide that impacts on disabled communities variably according to their disability, with d/Deaf and mobility-impaired communities being least impacted (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006). As such, those able to participate in the research were those with the privilege of both an internet connection and a suitable device (S. Ryan et al., 2023). Online interviews may provide less contextual detail in terms of body language observation, and connectivity issues can prove disruptive to interview flow, but contrary to Cater's observation that the 'head shot' in online interviewing can prohibit full communication, the consequent masking of disability can be liberating for those with visible impairments (Cater, 2011, cited in Howlett, 2022, p. 390). Online interviews also allowed participants to respond from familiar and adapted surroundings, negating the need for them to contend with exclusionary built environments to travel to the interview, meaning they had more energy to engage with the questions, and could refer directly to their workplace setup: their home. Additional technological enhancements such as live closed captioning facilitated interviews with d/Deaf participants, mirroring their observations about the ways in which closed captioning could enhance their inclusion in online workplace discussions whilst saving them the energy needed to lip read. Nevertheless, while closed captioning technology has improved with the more recent additions of artificial intelligence, we

found it necessary to carefully monitor the closed captioning to avoid inaccurate transcriptions and miscommunication.

Whilst, methodologically, constraints from both the pandemic and from impairment suggested that online interviews might be the safest and most convenient, the project grew out of the substantive counterfactuals resulting from such constraints; in other words, of *our* increased inclusion as engagement moved online. The normalisation of remote working negated, to some extent, the need for physically disabled communities to rely on reasonable adjustments of remote or hybrid working to construct workspaces and schedules that accommodated their needs. Yet, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to recede, calls for a return ‘to normal’ signalled that the inclusion and accessibility gains might only be temporary (F. Ryan, 2020, 2021). The ability to not simply imagine how the labour market might be structured and bounded differently, but to fully explore counterfactual inclusion processes presented a novel opportunity that invited exploration ‘as if’ this were the new norm (Cooper, 2020; Perry-Kessaris, 2021). Substantively and conceptually, the research also suggests further studies into how labour market bounding processes, or those structures that limit access to and inclusion within the labour market, are constitutive of disablement, and, in turn, wider social rationalities of disability (Russell, 2001; Russell & Malhotra, 2002). Thus, through the exploration of prefigurative counterfactuals, the project invited wider questions of both labour and disability ontology and epistemology, including processes of labour market construction and critique (Ashiagbor, 2021; Rittich, 2014, 2015). In turn, this has led to current research querying how and why disabled people continue to be undervalued in the context of the labour market, and an appreciation of the ways in which social value arises through labour market participation, aligning with wider social ontologies of value, productivity and the modification of the body. While we may not

wish for further social disruptions on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, the imposition of constraints offers pathways for prefigurative counterfactuals as methodology to construct and explore different norms, offering creative and participatory substantive research trajectories and suggesting complex feedback loops between constraint-inspired methodological and substantive insights.

Conclusions: Constraints as methodology?

Drawing on the two empirical examples set out in Sections ‘Example 1: Methodological insights and innovations: Autoethnography’ and ‘Example 2: Substantive and methodological insights and innovations: Prefigurative counterfactuals’ respectively from my own experience to illustrate some of the methodological pivots prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper has explored constraints both *as* limitations and *as* enabling possibilities. The discussion has also suggested how constraint-based methodological innovation can lead to novel substantive and ontological insights, discussed here in relation to labour market inclusion best practice for disabled communities. Yet, as Section ‘The role of technology in moderating constraints’ has noted, while some key pivots were facilitated by technology, that same technology has the potential to entrench dominant epistemologies and ontologies, and the discussion noted that our tacit assumptions can be preserved in ‘digital aspic’ if careful attention is not paid to the reproduction of hegemonic regimes and rationalities (Williams, 2022b, pp. 111–112). Furthermore, uncertainties deriving from pandemic-mandated pivots have engendered both discomfort and innovation, minimising some inequalities while accentuating others (Jewitt et al., 2023; Meckin et al., 2023; Nind et al., 2023).

To what extent, then, are the shifts outlined above likely to offer lasting challenge to dominant approaches? Turns towards personal,

reflective and creative methodologies such as autoethnography and prefigurative counterfactuals might signal a methodological plurality that can continue to challenge sites of inequality, suggesting the emergence of further substantive counterfactual labour market norms. However, despite the generative feedback loops suggested in the second example between constraint-based methodological and substantive insights, in the light of the ‘back to normal’ rhetoric, it remains to be seen the extent to which novel approaches might offer lasting alternatives for those wishing to critique and reshape persistent inequalities and ways of knowing the world.

One way of embedding some of the positive changes that have emerged from COVID-19 pandemic-mandated pivots might be to consider constraints *as* methodology. In other words, might we consider more, rather than fewer, constraints as methodologically enabling, particularly in the light of their potential to generate novel substantive insights?

In the social sciences, might we imagine a greater plurality of postgraduate research programmes, perhaps including the normalisation of truly interdisciplinary doctoral programmes, Practice as Research-based enquiry, or Participatory Activist Research, for example (Nelson, 2013; Pickerill et al., 2021)? Such developments would require not only shifts in how we think about and carry out research, but in wider institutional requirements and the funding landscape. They might also require that the academy reflects on its expectations of the next generation of researchers, activists and policy makers. In not only reappraising processes and accessibility of knowledge production, but their valorisation and ultimate goals, how might we reflect on and embed insights and best practice glimpsed during the pandemic? These wider questions have the potential to determine the extent to which constraints-as-methodology might be generative for future research, offering radical responses to current problems.

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Note

1. I use language aligning with the British social model of disability throughout, meaning that this paper refers to “disabled people” rather than “people with disabilities”.

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